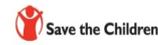


The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence the humanitarian system



Reflections from the Experience of the Humanitarian Reform Officer, NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project Afghanistan

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Background on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan

Afghanistan continues to be a complex humanitarian environment where we, in the past year, have witnessed the drastic deterioration of security in the North and West of the country, the highest number of civilian casualties since 2001, a significant increase in the number of conflict-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs), and escalating security operations which threaten the lives and safety of civilians, including aid workers. All this has occurred in the context of extremely limited access in the South and East and slow recovery from the global food price crisis and on-going natural disasters.

In the midst of this environment, the humanitarian community in Afghanistan struggles to adapt to the changing circumstances and retaining a response capacity to people's humanitarian needs. Yet one of the main concerns from the humanitarian community is that Afghanistan does not fit the humanitarian box of strictly addressing the life-saving needs of conflict or natural disaster affected populations. It is indeed a country at war and suffering from frequent, small, quick onset disasters and yet, as many others, it is a country in desperate need of economic, social and judicial development. Hence most of the actors addressing the needs of the Afghan people are multi-mandated aiming to adapt their programmes to the reality on the ground. This has sparked quite some discussion with regards to humanitarian reform where adherence to humanitarian principles and donor requirements can be difficult to achieve. How can the education cluster justify its emphasis on the approximately 340,000 children who cannot access education due to conflict while 4 million Afghan children cannot access education due to poverty, gender disparity and environmental constraints? How can the IDP task force justify assistance to displaced Afghans affected by conflict and natural disasters whilst they share their settlements with Afghans who have fled their homes due to economic, social and judicial reasons, yet may not be technically entitled to humanitarian assistance? How do we treat only severe acute malnutrition while 54% of all Afghan children suffer from chronic malnutrition and need preventive measures to not deteriorate to severe acute malnutrition? How do we justify – especially for Afghans – humanitarian medical programming addressing the most serious humanitarian morbidity and mortality indicators while not working through or addressing the

¹ Disclaimer: This background paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the participating NGOs in the Afghanistan steering group, but is a personal reflection by the HRO.

needs within the Afghan nation-wide Basic Health Care Package which is a government-run developmental initiative? Within this complex context, humanitarian reform is being implemented in Afghanistan where the challenging effort is being made to separate the humanitarian needs and response planning from development needs while aiming to find synergies between the two by expanding and integrating the Early Recovery network. This is admittedly difficult, however, there is a strong need to clearly distinguish the humanitarian community and programming from the larger developmental effort and emphasise the humanitarian principles due to access challenges.

Objectives of the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project in Afghanistan

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (NHRP) was operational in Afghanistan between June 2009 and August 2010. It had as its main global objective to strengthen the effective engagement of local, national and international humanitarian NGOs in reformed humanitarian leadership, financing and coordination mechanisms, ultimately supporting the humanitarian community to fulfil the objectives of ensuring that humanitarian response is predictable, equitable, standardised and effective for people in need. Obviously, NGOs are only one part of the humanitarian system and closely work with other stakeholders – UN agencies, ICRC/IFRC, donors and relevant government institutions. Hence the project in Afghanistan has been working closely with the whole humanitarian community and not just the NGO section of it.

The most substantial work the project has undertaken is raising the awareness level of the humanitarian community of how the system is intended to work and what the roles and responsibilities of the various actors are within the system. The significant lack of knowledge among a majority of the actors was surprising and required concerted efforts from the project to increase the levels of knowledge and understanding. The project then has focused on working with the relevant actors to find solutions to the obstacles identified such as: the structure and work-flow of the cluster system, access to the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and the Emergency Response Fund (ERF) funding, efficiency of the humanitarian leadership through the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and, lastly, how to streamline partnership and accountability within the system.

Challenges and lessons learnt

Clusters: The cluster system was rolled out in Afghanistan in June 2008 and is still in the process of being rolled out, especially in terms of having a country-wide impact. The clusters were established on a Kabul level and, for most of them, the link between the regions and provinces has been limited. At the start of the NHRP, there was consensus among the relevant actors that the cluster system had yet to demonstrate impact, but that the system had potential, provided that the required human and financial resources were invested. Efforts by both UN agencies and NGOs have been invested into making the system more effective in the last year with mixed results. Currently, there are clusters that are viewed as partially useful and others that have yet to convince the humanitarian community of their purpose. The main challenges remaining are:

- Lack of capacity both among the designated UN agency leads and participating cluster partners, such as NGOs and government representatives. Dedicated cluster

staff have not been in place for most of the clusters to take on the bulk of the work and to provide the cluster with purpose and direction. Lack of OCHA capacity to support the work of the clusters has been a problem which now seems to be in the process of being addressed.

- There is minimum relevance to quick-onset emergencies due to the clusters not having a regional/provincial outreach and field staff not being aware of the cluster existence. In addition, the system of having monthly meetings, lack of specific cluster staff and limited inter-cluster leadership by OCHA all contribute to the clusters' lack of relevance to supporting the field with responding to emergencies.
- In reality, the clusters have been given perhaps too wide of a mandate to really be able to have an impact on the core operational needs of the field. The cluster is expected to: Establish and maintain a baseline within their sector; develop strategy and response planning within the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)/Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP)/Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) context; carry out contingency planning and emergency preparedness; develop cluster-specific standards or adopt existing standards to the country context; conduct or facilitate training for cluster partners; develop a fundraising strategy for the sector and interact with donors; facilitate funding through the ERF and CERF and from individual donors; develop and implement an advocacy and policy strategy; engage in civil/military coordination; develop and ensure adherence to downward accountability standards; ensure monitoring and general standards adherence; interact with the government; and last, but not least, carry out operational coordination. Hence a well-functioning cluster is very time-consuming: working groups preferably need to be created for almost everything that the cluster does in order for the cluster to be inclusive and transparent in its activities. The demand for the participation of cluster partners in these groups usually outweighs their capacity. To measure up the impact of the clusters in view of their objectives, especially where there is no dedicated staff capacity to implement the above mentioned responsibilities, is almost setting the clusters up to fail.

Leadership: Together with OCHA, the wider NGO community and the HCT NGOs and the HC, the NHRP has been facilitating a discussion regarding humanitarian leadership in Afghanistan. The following are the main issues that have surfaced during these discussions:

- The quadruple mandate of the HC in Afghanistan (he is also Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG), UNDP Resident Representative and Resident Coordinator) has been, and continues to be, a contentious issue. Within such a complicated humanitarian, political and military context, the NGO community does not perceive the HC position to be able to represent and uphold humanitarian principles. Yet there has not been an effort made to advocate for a separation of the position on this basis. The NGO community has, on multiple occasions, requested the HC not to represent them or to have an NGO representative present during important events where the HC speaks on behalf of the humanitarian community. Political and military context aside, though, the sheer workload of the quadruple position limits the incumbent's capacity to fulfil the role of HC. The current HC has himself raised the idea that the roles should be separated based on workload and the importance of humanitarian leadership.

- The HCT has been established in Afghanistan and has been consistently chaired by the HC, yet the impact of the forum is limited. The guidelines prescribe for the meetings to be “action-oriented in purpose and produce reality-based decisions that are followed up”. An improvement should be aimed for in this regard since the meetings are currently characterised by information sharing and endorsement or rejection of decisions already reached in other coordination venues. The NHRP and the HCT NGOs have been advocating for a structured work plan with achievable goals and objectives based on the Humanitarian Action Plan to be established and, although endorsed by the HC at the time, such a plan has yet to be developed. Based on discussions with mainly the UN representatives on the HCT and the HC there is contentment with keeping the HCT as an information sharing venue, while the NGOs would prefer a more strategic and directive body.
- During the duration of the NHRP in Afghanistan, it has become abundantly clear that none of the humanitarian reform mechanisms and tools can function without a strong OCHA office. The relatively recent re-establishment of OCHA in Afghanistan and the lack of capacity the office has struggled with in its inception has had a significant impact on the lack of humanitarian reform progress in Afghanistan. Yet the establishment of the OCHA mission has significantly supported and facilitated the financial aspect of the reform with the creation of the ERF and facilitation of CERF allocations. The NHRP, together with the wider NGO community, has emphasised the importance of OCHA and advocated for the necessary capacity to be put in place.

Financing: The reformed financial mechanisms have yet to play a significant role in the Afghan context considering the amounts of humanitarian funding at hand. The CERF contributions are limited and the ERF was only established in January 2010, making it too soon to evaluate its impact. Yet in the above-mentioned context, where the humanitarian needs can be difficult to separate from the longer term early recovery or developmental needs, the clusters tend to struggle with the life-saving criteria of the pooled funds, especially with how to include training needs not covered by the CERF. The main issues relating to the financial mechanisms are as follows:

- The inclusion of NGOs in setting CERF funding priorities and selecting proposals for CERF allocations had, up until 2009, been severely limited. Significant improvements were witnessed. In the 2010 early CERF underfunded round where Afghanistan was allocated 11 million USD. With a concerted effort by OCHA, the HC, dedicated cluster leads and the NHRP supporting the NGO cluster partners all contributed to an increased NGO awareness of the process of accessing CERF funding. The interlinked aspect of humanitarian reform connecting coordination, leadership, funding and partnership showed its potential in the process and is promising for future allocations.
- The Afghanistan ERF was set up earlier this year and, while the response from especially national NGOs (NNGOs) has been encouraging; the response from donors to resource the fund has been less so. The fund has not had the necessary means to respond to submitted proposals. In addition, the fund has a high proposal rejection rate, which can partly be attributed to the NGO community not being familiar with the fund’s guidelines and purpose. The refusals are also attributed to the

emergency and life-saving criteria, which are difficult to adhere to in the context as mentioned before. Despite these criteria, most of the funds have gone to projects characterised as early recovery. The guidelines are under review at this moment to see how the fund can become more useful and advocacy towards donors to commit resources to the fund has been carried out by the HC, OCHA and the NHRP.

Partnership and accountability: This is the aspect of the reform which has had the least progress in Afghanistan. The *Principles of Partnership* (PoP) are mainly unknown and not referred to in any of the mechanisms and the accountability aspect has yet to be taken on by the clusters, mainly due to a lack of capacity. The participation of NNGOs in both the clusters and in the field coordination mechanisms is surprisingly high yet it can be defined as attendance and not participation. The situation is complex and the humanitarian community has continuously struggled to increase the NNGO involvement, but there is a limited interest to participate by the majority of the NNGOs for whom funding is a main priority while coordination, strategy and policy are of less interest. The NHRP has worked extensively with NNGOs in Kabul and in the field to raise the awareness of the humanitarian architecture and its possibilities, but with limited results.

Conclusion and recommendations

An important aspect for the NHRP while raising the awareness of the existence of humanitarian reform has been to emphasise that the structures are not an end in themselves but tools and means of improving the way we provide humanitarian assistance to people in need. There is a certain fatigue among the Afghan humanitarian community when it comes to improving response. There is a sense that the structures are becoming an end in themselves and the centre of action, rather than tools to facilitate work. It is a common reflection by humanitarian actors in Afghanistan that as UN agencies, NGOs and donors, the time we spend on internal servicing of structures is out of proportion to the time spent assessing and discussing community needs, not to mention out of proportion with the impact the servicing achieves. The words “working groups” and “task forces” are some of the most ridiculed and scorned concepts within the Afghan humanitarian context followed closely by “lessons learnt” and “let’s have a workshop on it”, and for good reason. There is no simple solution to relieve this fatigue since the recommendations for improving the structures all require more resources, time and capacity. During the NHRP workshops around Afghanistan, the request from the field actors is consistently for better coordination, not more and this is in a country where the clusters have yet to establish themselves in the field.²

The following represent some of the overall recommendations for humanitarian reform in Afghanistan

Expand the role of OCHA: Under the current structure, for clusters to realistically be able to achieve their stated objectives, they need: a cluster lead, NGO co-lead, cluster coordinator, information management unit (IMU) officer, various consultants and potential regional/provincial focal points. It is thus very costly for each of the current 10 clusters in Afghanistan to have this level of staffing. For 2010, the Food Security and Agriculture cluster estimate that they needed approximately 720,000USD for coordination costs and included

² The NHRP have produced a number of papers recommending specific action in regards to the coordination, funding, leadership and lastly the partnership/ accountability implementation levels in Afghanistan which can be accessed on the project website and will not be repeated here.

the proposal in the HAP. The cluster coordination cost is also in addition to the national and regional OCHA offices; the national and regional ACBAR (NGO coordination body) offices; and various government-led coordination structures. A simplified and more cost effective way could be to increasingly resource OCHA to service the clusters in a more centralised manner both on a national and regional level.

Limit the cluster mandate and expectations: As listed above, the range of cluster activities and expectations is currently quite wide, leading to a scattered approach with limited impact and requiring a significant investment in its capacity. A way to address that might be to create clear priorities and minimum benchmarks for what a cluster is supposed to achieve and focus on, in order to be relevant to the needs of the field and ultimately the population.

Reconsider the multiple role/mandate of humanitarian leadership: The contentious quadruple mandate of the HC remains an issue of concern. The HC is expected to facilitate and ensure the advocacy, coordination, leadership, representation, resource mobilisation, planning and information exchange of the humanitarian community in-country and that requires a dedicated and consistent presence and it creates a vacuum when the capacity to lead on these issues is not at hand. A more realistic expectation regarding the role of the HC and ultimately the HCT needs to be considered. Currently with the HC lacking time and the HCT being limited to an information-sharing forum, there is no forum to ensure a strategic, coordinated overall response by the humanitarian community and additionally there are no accountability measures put in place and exercised to ensure that we are delivering on our commitments.

Recognise that there is a cost for coordination for NGOs: Humanitarian reform has increased the need for external interaction and coordination for NGOs. Currently, NGOs themselves carry the cost of the coordination participation and contributions in terms of taking on co-lead responsibilities, participation in numerous working groups, fund management responsibilities and various focal point assignments. It needs to be recognised by donors as an integral activity and hence funded as a standard budget line in the same way security, visibility and internal learning are funded. This can also increase the demand for quality NGO participation leading for better, and not more, coordination.